Mass-transit, highway system can complement each other

By VIJAY K. MATHUR
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The Coalition for Accountable Government recently complained that the investment in FrontRunner is a waste of investment, and the planned extension of the system from Salt Lake to Provo should be dropped. The coalition claims that, so far, FrontRunner has not reduced the congestion on I-15.

However, the Standard-Examiner's Sept. 9 editorial, "Rail is necessary and valuable," argues against the views of the coalition and ends the editorial with the statement, "Commuter rail is a good thing. It's expensive, but we need it."

I am glad that the editorial recognizes the importance of the masstransit system and the folly of the policy of meeting demand for commuting and mobility only by building more highways.

In an opinion piece on Aug. 29 in the Standard-Examiner ("Demand-side policies can solve many of the nation's problems"), I argued that the traditional response to highway congestion has been to increase the supply of more highways by building new highways and/or expanding the capacity of existing ones. When resources like oil, raw materials, space, and air quality are plentiful and available at a reasonably low price commensurate with the income of the state and its people, it made economic sense to build highways. But, now we are finding out that a shortage of oil, raw materials, space, congestion, and air quality are driving up the social cost of construction and commuting; it is time that we plan for other modes of transportation.

The main purpose of any transportation department is to provide mobility to people and goods such that it maximizes net-benefit to the society (the difference between benefit and cost). The Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) should not be concerned only with building the transportation system at minimum cost, but also in efficiently allocating users of the system among different modes of transportation. If the highway system is congested and leads to more pollution, it may be cheaper for society to divert users to another mode of transportation. Mass-transit complements the highway system because it reduces the congestion and pollution costs on Utah's highways.

The nonprofit foundation The Road Information Program (TRIP) reported in 2006 that for the top 10 most-congested sections of the Utah highway system, congestion costs (extra fuel used and time spent in congestion) varied from $621 to $1,275 per motorist per year. Among the top 10, the eight most-congested sections are in Utah County and Salt Lake counties. Total congestion cost per

motorist per year was $4,321 in the five sections of Utah County.

TRIP also found that during 1990-2004, vehicle traffic in Utah increased by 69 percent, the fourthhighest rate in the nation, while population increased by only 40 percent. The Reason Foundation finds that trips in the Salt Lake area take 28 percent longer to complete during rush hours as compared to non-rush hours. By 2030, the average rush-hour trip will take 59 percent longer to complete if transportation system capacity is not expanded.

Another cost associated with driving on the highways is the pollution cost. Victoria Transport Policy Institute estimates that in 2002 an average car in the U.S. imposed 6.2 cents per mile in pollution cost of greenhouse emissions during peak hours of driving. This implies that an average motorist imposed approximately $775 in pollution cost per year by undertaking a 50-mile roundtrip each working day during peak hours. The cost of riding mass-transit will be substantially less, as compared to all costs of driving, including congestion and pollution costs.

One way to finance mass transit, and at the same time reduce congestion and pollution costs to Utahns, is to impose congestion pricing. This means that people will pay to drive during peak hours on congested Utah highways. It would encourage people to take mass transit during peak hours. This would result in efficient allocation of users of the transportation network. Congestion pricing is tried successfully in cities like London, Stockholm and Singapore. According to the Environmental Defense Fund, Singapore was the first to implement congestion pricing in 1975. It resulted in a 20 percent increase in the use of public transportation and 45 percent reduction in traffic. Similar results were found in London and Stockholm.

Given Utahns' love for open spaces and a clean environment, it is imperative that leaders at UDOT and in the Legislature take bold steps to build a transportation network with minimum social costs and maximum social benefits.

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